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ABSTRACT

This study explores conflict between school superintendents and board members as perceived by superintendents. A critical incident methodology as elaborated by Flanagan was used to isolate and examine conflict. Common types of conflict include problems with family and friends, personal agendas, hiring and firing problems, and role uncertainty. Findings suggest that board members' private interests (as defined by superintendents), combined with superintendents' ingrained expectations regarding a proper corporate model of school governance, contribute to a dysfunctional conflict in the school policy domain. Both the expression of private interests and the superintendents' expectations impede role negotiation, a natural part of the superintendent/board member relationship. Helping school district officials and administrators make conflict more constructive requires changes in assistance to boards and in the preparation and socialization of school administrators. (30 references) (MLH)

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The Buck Stops Here

Critical Incidents in School Governance as Interpreted by Superintendents

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Abstract

This study explores conflict between school superintendents and board members as perceived by superintendents. A critical incident methodology as elaborated by Flanagan (1954) was used to isolate and examine conflict. The authors concluded that the private interests of board members as defined by superintendents as well as the ingrained expectations that superintendents have relative to a proper corporate model of school governance both contribute to a dysfunctional conflict in the policy domain of schools. Both--the expression of private interests and the expectations of superintendents--impede the common practice of role negotiation which the authors contend is a natural part of the relationship between superintendent and board members.

The Buck Stops Here

Critical Incidents in School Governance as Interpreted by Superintendents

Introduction

The "buck stops here" is a phrase that one often hears superintendents use to refer to the authority of their job. To these school administrators the phrase means that final decision-authority resides in the office of the superintendent. The origins of the phrase come from America's pioneer times when men would play poker. The buck referred to the "deal" and was literally an object held by the player whose turn it was to deal. Often it was a buck knife stuck in the table in front of the dealer. Thus, the phrase "the buck stops here" means to accept the full authority (Mathews, 1951, pp. 198-199). By whose authority is a question that frequently divides superintendents from their boards.

Problems between superintendents and school boards or between the professional educator and lay politician are ubiquitous in the nation's schools. There is cause to believe that the common governance structure that mingles the career educator and the lay board member may no longer always be functional. In Kentucky, for example, the usual board/superintendent relationship has been altered by legislative mandate. In Chicago school site councils intrude on traditional governance arrangements. By

December 28, 1990, 45 of the great city school districts were searching for superintendents (Bradley, 1990). In many smaller districts about the nation, superintendents and board members do not get along any more easily (Bryant & Grady, 1989; Chance & Capps, 1990).

Two questions guide this study: (a) are there common types of conflict that appear characteristic to school district governance; and (b) if there are patterns to conflict in school governance, what system features contribute to these patterns?

Background

In one of the larger studies of superintendent and school board conflict, H. Thomas James wrote that the "structural elements inherent in all school board-superintendent relationships render periodic conflict between the two roles almost inevitable" (James, 1967, p. 6). James also reported studies at Stanford University indicating that much of this conflict "can be generalized as conflict over which decisions are properly the domain of the professional educator and which are properly made by the citizen board" (James, 1967, p. 6).

From the perspective of many superintendents much of the conflict was unnecessary and could be obviated by close adherence to the corporate model of school governance, an approach infused with a bureaucratic rationality.

> The comedy and tragedy of school-board management as seen by a former superintendent leads to a definite proposal for saving school systems from the damaging effects of political influence and personal favoritism (William McAndrew, The Nation's Schools, 1929).

So writes McAndrew, a superintendent who was "involuntarily retired" in 1929. McAndrew's problems with his board seemed much like problems that superintendents have today. He faulted board members for having no conception of their duty, for paying attention to politics and not to "instruction," and for representing private interests rather than the school organization. McAndrew described the demise of several other superintendents and remarked that in each case the administration had advanced the service of the school to the community and was free of "defect of character" (McAndrew, 1929, p. 21). Generations of school superintendents have run up against negative board votes and have often felt that such votes defied reason, common sense and sound educational practice.

Like many superintendents, McAndrew viewed the school board from a particular managerial perspective. That perspective held that "the school will do its work best if board and head understand and accept a basic division of responsibilities" (Johnson, 1980, p. 2). That perspective, drawn from a corporate model of

educational governance (Tyack, 1974), defines the role of the board as one of setting the purpose and policies of the school organization, appointing the chief executive officer, and delegating to that officer person the responsibility for operating the organization (Johnson, 1980). In decision-making, an adherence to a rational model (Allison, 1971) is favored. This conception of the role of the board and its chief executive officer has dominated educational administration and has been part of the training and socialization of superintendents for many years.

> Cunningham et al. (1977) describe this role conception well. The superintendent of schools was viewed as the head of the hierarchical organization of the schools and the final authority for the maintenance of all systems within the school organization. He was considered the "boss" and the dispenser of rewards and punishments to all personnel within the system (Cunningham et al., Educational Administration, 1977).

These two features of school district governance, the public and private interests of the board member and the expectations of the school administrator, are important features of the conflict that superintendents report as critical. The former appears in the selection by superintendents of those incidents deemed

critical; the latter appears as one listens to these superintendents describe what bothers them about school board behavior.

In this paper the authors develop these two underlying aspects of conflict in school district governance and then report on the findings of a study of superintendent perceptions of critical incidents.

Private Interests in Public Settings

The first of these underlying conditions of conflict is the "private" behavior of the public board. Private has a special meaning here, one that indicates the legal capacity of the public board member(s) to represent constituent and/or personal interest. To school administrators this structure infusion of private interests into the organizational policy domain represents a serious type of irrationality and is a constant source of uncertainty.

The public board of education is as difficult a phenomenon to superintendents today as it was to those of Cubberly's generation. Boards are still the target of administrative criticism and they are still faulted for impeding educational progress. The recent restructuring of the Kentucky school system demonstrates how boards are sometimes seen as dysfunctional. Restrictions over school board hiring practices (nepotism) was one of the hotly

contested issues in the new Kentucky plan (Walker, 1990). To address perceived widespread board malfeasance, the new Kentucky plan gave superintendents the authority to hire and fire. The Kentucky restructuring plan sought to control one of the egregious characteristics of the lay board, the representation of local and particularistic interests.

Getzels' (1952) distinction between universalistic and particularistic relationships is important. By universalistic Getzels means that the relationship between individuals is defined by the offices they occupy and the functional rules and standard operating procedures of the organization. Particularistic means that emotional and personal meanings supercede rational factors; who is involved in a relationship is more important than what is involved. It is the tendency toward the particularistic in the lay board that professional educators have sought to control.

The lay school board remains essentially the same creation that was championed by earlier school reformers. These reformers sought to control the abuses of a ward system of governance that they saw as detrimental to the evolution of a professional model of schooling by grafting on to the school district a corporate form of governance (Tyack, 1974, pp. 142-145). Like the large corporation, the school organization should be organized under one "executive head."

For example, Mack argued before the National Education Association that "a man is the owner of one of the directors of a factory employing many hands and concerned with many complicated processes, and who concedes without hesitation the value of an expert superintendent who shall direct all shop details, unhampered by the owner or the directors, will, as a member of a school board, reverse all the precedents of a private business and do precisely the thing he would oppose as ruinous in factory management (Mack, 1896). Mack, Cubberly, Butler and other administrative progressives promoted the corporate model of school governance.

Implied in this corporate model was a new board and superintendent relationship. The superintendent established the agenda of meetings and ran them. Board members "no longer spoke to the galleries or worked for particular constituents" (Tyack, 1974, p. 145). A bureaucratic rationality was meant to imbue the policy making domain. Board capacity to behave as political actors was to be mitigated to some degree by laying upon them a mandate for corporate rationality. Professors of educational administration were major partners with large city school superintendents in promoting this model.

But the portrait of the proper school board as dutifully mindful of its policy-making function has always been an ideal not

quite achieved. Generations of school administrators, critics, and professors of educational administration have complained about school boards overstepping their boundaries. McAndrew (1929), Judd (1934), and Pierce (1986) all represent a chorus of voices that have argued about the appropriate behavior and role of the lay school board. Even at the postsecondary level a similar debate over problems of the public board has occurred. A recent report concluded that "among public boards . . . appointment is a better means than election of selecting board members" (Kerr & Gade, 1989, p. 41); that "new board members are not given an adequate orientation" (p. 47); "that a small board can be a disaster" (p. 47). A study by the Institute for Educational Leadership concluded that "despite the assumed influence of the superintendent over board members, substantial data indicate that board members, particularly in urban districts with changing clients and cultures, are more strongly influenced by their constituencies than by the traditional school superintendent" (Danzberger et al., 1986).

Dreben (1968) lays out this tension between private and public interests cleanly. He notes when the "realms of occupation and politics converge, that is, among elected and appointed officials of government, the law usually delineates a boundary between public and private interests" (Dreben, 1968, p. 116). For public

school board members, the boundary between public and private is not clear. Board members in some communities are expected to represent private interests; they are not enjoined to leave those interests behind. At times this may lead them to seek to fire teachers and coaches and administrators or to make operational decisions about books and school facilities and athletic fields. When exhibited, superintendents often perceive this type of board behavior as highly contributory to conflict in the policy domain.

Questions need to be asked about the connection to constituency. Does a different process need to be constructed for obtaining board members? Can or should board members be socialized and trained so that they will function under the corporate model? Are private interests in public settings bad? Are there ways to make this capacity for conflict healthy? If so, are there unidentified resources that should be provided school districts to help deal with conflict in constructive terms?

Ingrained Expectations

A second and equally important underlying condition of conflict in superintendent/board relations has to do with the preparation of the school administrator. Since the training of educational administrators in departments of educational administration became a condition of employment, superintendents have been taught the respective role definitions of superintendent and board as

established by the corporate model. One important aspect of these role definitions involves the clear delineation between the policy making powers of the board and the administrative functions of the superintendent. This training constitutes a catechism that creates what we later label the "administrative conscience." We suggest that this preparation continues to perpetrate what Bridges (1977) calls a "trained incapacity."

Knezevich writes in a textbook used in many educational administration classes that "the educational policy-making function of school boards is demanding and time-consuming, and should preclude preoccupation with "administrivia" (Knezevich, 1984, p. 277). As defined in many places for many years, the role of the board member(s) is confined to making policy. In another text, De Young and Wynn (1972) list typical role responsibilities for the board:

1. development and improvement of the educational program;
2. selection of the chief administrative officer;
3. provision of funds and facilities; and
4. maintenance of good relations between school and community.

The definition of school board role is ingrained in the minds of administrators and conditions their expectations relative to actual board behavior in part because of preparation programs in

educational administration and in part because of the socialization processes at work in the field.

If proof is needed that this corporate ideal is promoted in administrative circles, Jerry Melton, writing in a recent issue of an American Association of School Administrators newsletter outlined six accepted management principles:

1. separation of policy and operations;
2. singular responsibility for operations;
3. assignment of key administrators;
4. clear delineation of line and support functions;
5. logical grouping of administrative functions; and
6. reasonable span of control.

What is interesting about Melton's principles is that they could have been written by Elwood Cubberly in 1920. These portray the same conception of board and superintendent roles as discussed above.

Criticisms of the governance perspective that emerge from the corporate model abound (Newlon, 1934; Callahan, 1962; Foster, 1986; Gibboney, 1987; Bryant, 1989; Murphy, 1990). Implied if not stated directly, these criticisms suggest that old conceptions and definitions are no longer productive.

It is the argument of the authors that the socialization of superintendents to expect particular role definitions and

behaviors becomes one of the factors in governance that is deemed critical. This is not a new suggestion. Writing about the nature of leadership, Bridges explored the dysfunctional character of a training and socialization that led school administrators to "faculty role expectations" (Bridges, 1977, p. 214). Expectations are ingrained; flexibility to adapt to different understandings is restricted.

It is of value to review one of the few studies aimed directly at the role perspectives of superintendents and board members.

Role Definition and Behavior

Although little empirical research has been done on superintendent/board perceptions of role beyond periodic surveys by national associations, Gross et al. (1958) conducted a study of the role perceptions of 105 superintendents and 508 board members on role definitions and conflict. Table 1 reports selected findings relative to the role perception held by superintendents for board members.

Insert Table 1 Here

The data in Table 1 suggest a strong concensus among superintendents about appropriate board role and behavior. These role conceptions of what the board should do follow the criteria

of the corporate model. Notice the superintendents believe that only the superintendent should appoint the teacher and remember the new Kentucky plan. Notice the strong support for a board ethic that puts the school before the interests of the board. Notice that the near unanimity of superintendents about some of these items suggests the strength of the model that casts the administrator as the chief executive officer.

The Gross study was conducted in 1958 and gathered a great deal of data. Gross et al. sought to know if there was role consensus between superintendents and board members. On the basis of their data they concluded that there was no consensus on role definition between superintendents and board members and that the "different expectations held for incumbents' behavior and attributes are crucial for an understanding of their different behaviors" (Gross et al., 1958, p. 321).

From this they suggest that the world in which the superintendent and board operate is unpredictable. When consensus is achieved, different members will agree on the rights and obligations of each other. If one person does not conform to those expectations, others will apply sanctions to bring the deviant into line. In this way, all will work smoothly. Gross et al. thus held that role consensus should be construed as a variable. When it is not there, member behavior is

unpredictable. Sanctions may or may not be applied. Role behavior may or may not be approved. Given this indeterminate nature of role consensus, Gross et al. argued that the "important research question is the isolation of conditions under which different consequences emerge from the application of sanctions" (Gross et al., 1958, p. 322). This single statement leads the authors to the study reported below as an attempt to know more about what happens in school governance given the likely inconclusive nature of role consensus.

Another concept explored by Gross et al. is of importance. The world of educational governance is unpredictable in part because in this world actors play multiple roles. Because there is no consensus about role, the role behavior of incumbents is necessarily unrestricted. In Getzels' terms, the relationships are "functionally diffuse" or "bound together in such a way that the obligations of the one to the other . . . are in a sense limitless" (Getzels, 1952, p. 238). Thus, the superintendent and board member may plan many roles and may "activate each role singly" (Gross et al., 1958, p. 323). We refer to this possibility as the constant negotiating of roles.

Thus, not only is there a lack of consensus about role but also there is the probability that superintendents and board members play multiple roles. Furthermore, there is likely to be

no constancy in the individual's definition of role. In one context a board member may be an impartial and rational policy maker. In another s/he may be a highly involved decision-maker. In such an unpredictable environment, the corporate model becomes incoherent.

The Study

Using the critical incident technique as specified by Flanagan (1954), the investigators sought to know what incidents superintendents would define as critical in their working relationships with boards and what bothered superintendents about these incidents. All 310 superintendents of K-12 school districts in Nebraska received a letter asking them if they had experienced a critical incident with a board or board member and if they would be willing to discuss that incident.

After two mailings and follow up telephone calls, 98% of the superintendents responded. Of these, 176 (58%) reported experiencing a critical incident. And of these, 126 (71%) agreed to participate in the study.

Eighty superintendents were available for telephone interviews during the spring of 1989. These superintendents responded to ten open-ended questions in interviews that range from 30-45 minutes in length. The critical incident was the unit of analysis and 151 separate incidents were gathered in these interviews. The

interview schedule intentionally left the determination of what was critical up to the superintendent.

Prior to analysis, the investigators sought to provide structure to the data. Flanagan suggests that data from the incidents can be made more objective through classification. Accordingly a taxonomy of incidents was created. Table 2 presents the type and frequency of incident. Each incident was read and coded by each investigator, thus providing a multiple assessment.

Second, Flanagan's requirements for the determination of criticality were used. Flanagan suggests that an incident be an "observable human activity" and that it be "sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). The following criteria were used to determine whether or not the incident would be included in the study:

1. Did the incident occur in Nebraska?
2. Was the incident between a superintendent and a board member(s)?
3. Was the incident specific?
4. Did the incident occur during a specific period of time?

Using these criteria, 101 of the original 151 incidents were obtained for the study.

Flanagan notes that a reason for looking for critical incidents is to develop "practical procedure for improving performance" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 335). Understanding the relationships between superintendents and board members who are in conflict may lead to improvement. From the different discipline of anthropology, an equally compelling argument for the value of critical incidents emerges in Stephen Gould's remark that "one thoughtful deviant will teach you more than ten thousand solid citizens" (Gould, 1985, p. 101).

As a methodology, critical incident research is neither purely quantitative or qualitative. Typical procedures call for the creation of measurable taxonomies, a process common to quantitative research. On the other hand, the methodology allows human beings to create and determine the reality they believe they see. In this way, phenomena emerge not as predetermined laws or theories but as organizational artifacts (Greenfield, 1975) and the critical incident methodology places one foot in the qualitative domain.

In a separate study Grady and Bryant, (1989), a detailed analysis of nine categories of critical incidents is made. For this study, only the four most frequent type of incidents are discussed.

Common Types of Conflict

1. Family and friends (23%). Problems with family, relatives or friends formed the most frequent type of incident. Sometimes the incident would involve a superintendent's ruling over a matter involving a board member's child or relative. A board member or board would disagree and seek to use board authority to reverse or enervate the superintendent's position on the matter. An incident was reported about the superintendent's upholding a rule banning a board member's child from athletic competition because of inadequate grades. Individual board members allegedly sought waivers of dress codes for their children, lifting of disciplinary penalties so that their children could participate in school activities, and an abrogation of normal academic requirements so that a board member's child could lead the high school graduate procession. Incidents involving board members' children included vandalism, stealing, drug possession, and conviction for driving while intoxicated.

Problems centering around relatives also troubled many superintendents. The reluctance to hire a board member's relative was an issue. A board member's wife applied for a teaching job and was not hired. That board member later voted against renewing the superintendent's contract for the first time. A superintendent fired a cook who was the wife of a board member and later had to

resign his superintendency because of the vindictive behavior of the aggrieved board member. A superintendent reduced a teacher to a half-time position. That teacher's board member husband then voted against the superintendent's contract renewal.

Friends were also problematic for superintendents. A secretary that a superintendent fired was the friend of a board member's wife. Hard feelings over her termination eventually caused the superintendent to threaten resignation unless his decision was upheld. The decision was upheld but the superintendent reported that the aura of that incident soured relationships between himself and the board for years after the incident. In another situation, a superintendent wished to release a school counselor who was the "poker buddy" of several board members. He was unable to do so even though he felt sufficient grounds for the action.

2. Personal agendas (21%). A second major type of conflict involved problems with board members who had special and personal agendas relative to the school district and/or the superintendent. Some of these incidents involved the election of a board member whose sole purpose was perceived as ridding the district of the superintendent. Sometimes the superintendent did not clearly understand what bothered a board member but felt continually under attack and portrayed a minor incident as an example of an underlying hostility.

In other incidents board members were clear in their actions, often seeking to fire an unwanted administrator or teacher or coach. In one incident a board member sought to do this by attacking the personal reputation of a teacher and repeatedly brought evidence of the teacher's personal behavior to the board meeting. The superintendent perceived the board member as bypassing the contractual relationships between the district and employees. Another board member ran advertisements in the local paper about the incompetence of the superintendent. A board member ran on the issue of securing new basketball uniforms for the boy's team and wrangled with the superintendent over that issue for many months.

3. Hiring and firing (18%). Often conflict arose when board members or boards sought to hire and fire school district employees either against the superintendent's recommendation or sometimes without even speaking to the superintendent. From the superintendent's viewpoint, these board members expanded their activities beyond the conventional policy making functions of board behavior. Examples abounded: a board fired a coach the superintendent and principal endorsed; boards insisted that locals be hired for positions regardless of qualifications; two board members took it upon themselves to upbraid a teacher who had been criticized by several parents. A number of these incidents

involved athletic coaches. Board members sought to terminate coaches for losing seasons. In one case, a board sought out a prior community resident and offered him a coaching job without the superintendent's knowledge. In incidents involving athletics, it often appeared to the superintendent that he (there were no women in the study) had little control.

In this category of conflict over hiring and firing what was common was that the superintendent's recommendation was not upheld or that the board initiated action relative to hiring or firing. For example, in several cases board members made decisions to fire that from the superintendent's perspective violated due process requirements. As the superintendent saw these cases, this type of behavior produced unnecessary conflict and stress for the district.

4. Role uncertainty (17%). In this category superintendents perceived the major problem as board uncertainty about role. Although role uncertainty could be attributed to many of the other categories of incidents, the meaning of this category relates specifically to board interference in what superintendents define as their administrative duties or as an abrogation of what superintendents perceive to be legitimate board responsibilities.

Thus, individual board members who acceded to requests from community members for specific decisions or favors formed one part

of this category. Community members would secure permission to use a gym or an athletic field from a board member. A board member would conduct an evaluation of a bus driver after parental complaints or would purchase items for the school without going through the district's purchasing procedure. One board wanted to have every decision made by the superintendent approved at the monthly meeting. Another board arranged for a religious speaker during s ool despite the objections of the superintendent and principal.

Failure to follow conventional understandings for board behavior were also cited by superintendents although some of these could not be used in the study because they were not specific in time. Those incidents that were included were what could be labeled precipitating incidents, i.e., they were of little consequence in themselves but reported a long simmering state of tension. Thus, the superintendent would perceive a minor incident as a major one because it brought conflict into the open. For example, one superintendent wanted board approval for a purchase order involving a nonlocal company. A board member who owned a local business had often insisted that the district purchase locally and this had been a long standing issue. A minor purchase of little monetary consequence thus precipitated a bitter incident as perceived by the superintendent.

These then are some of the types of conflict that emerge from the superintendent's perceptions of what is critical.

The Administrative Consequence

We were interested not only in the nature of the critical incidents superintendents perceived but also in why they perceived these to be critical. Accordingly, one of the questions asked: Does the critical incident bother you because you felt it to be educationally unsound or unethical? If so, please explain.

Table 3 records the frequencies of responses to this question.

Insert Table 3 here

As with earlier questions, definitions of terminology were left unoperationalized. There was an interest in letting the observer of the incident (the superintendent) create the judgment. Interestingly, a great majority of the incidents (86 or 85%) were judged as unethical. One of the things that these superintendents perceived was that operating rules were not followed by board members. The phrase "rules were not followed" was used to describe 38% of the incidents. In 10% of the incidents, boards were faulted for being illegal (7%) or providing no warning (3%).

It is of note to recall the argument made earlier about the socializing of school administrators to expect particular role behaviors faithful to the corporate model of school governance.

The following commentary on the categories presented in Table 3 reveals this paradigm at work.

1. Unethical because educationally unsound (38%). It was the superintendent's use of the term educationally unsound that placed a response in this category. What was meant is not always clear. It appears that in the minds of superintendents there is an ethical enjoinder to behave in educationally appropriate ways. And as we have sought to demonstrate, part of the problem with this is that there is not always consensus over whose ethical system should be followed.

One said in criticizing a board that led him astray, "If you are going to take a straw poll, you need to use the information to your best ability." Several said that it was not right to let a good teacher go because of problems the teacher had as a coach or to hire an unqualified person when there was a more qualified person available. Another pointed out with a clearly felt injustice that "students were directly hurt during this incident." It is "not in the interests of children when a board member runs to get rid of the superintendent." "A board member should not run with an axe to grind." "The board spent too much time on unimportant issues." "Board members need to learn their roles as board members and not listen to outsiders." "A board member

should be interested in benefitting the taxpayer rather than in personal gain." "It is the superintendent's job to run the school."

These superintendents held a role definition for boards that apparently was not shared. Or if it was, the superintendent did not perceive a role consensus. By implication, that role definition is the one described earlier--the corporate board that confines itself to policy-making, possesses bureaucratic rationality in its decision-making processes, and allows the professional superintendent to function as the chief authority. It is a familiar model. It emerges more clearly when issues of rules and fairness were cited.

2. Issues of not following rules and fairness (38%). Many of these superintendents expected the operating procedures and rules of the game to be followed. When these rules of the game were violated, superintendents interpreted the violation as unethical. Again, the language of these incidents carries the meaning.

"It is unethical when a board does not allow the superintendent to perform his job," to not allow the superintendent "to do what he was hired to do." This was a repeated refrain. Although none of these administrators used the phrase, "the buck stops here," the notion of the superintendent as the chief administrative authority in charge of carrying out policy was clear. When the board did

not "follow correct procedure," did not make "directives according to established policy," or "took matters into their own hands," it was viewed as unethical. By implication board members were violating the role definition of the corporate model and operating outside the rules of the game. As Bridges warned, "the leader of an educational organization is likely to overestimate his potential for influence; his powers are more limited than he anticipates" (Bridges, 1977, p. 206).

Included in this category are incidents in which the superintendent stated that the board behavior was simply not fair and hence was unethical. As noted above, there is a sense that there are unwritten rules governing behavior that should be followed. It was unethical for "a board member to run for office to ruin a superintendent's reputation." It is "unethical to make accusations without knowing all of the facts."

A related aspect of these incidents was that the board or board member made decisions that the superintendent perceived as more properly the superintendent's. Often this was what was meant by not following procedure or by taking matters into their own hands. To harken back to the introduction, the superintendent was not able to exercise professional authority. The "buck," in fact, did not stop "here" as many of these superintendents believed should be the case. Established rules were not followed; an

implied contractual understanding had been violated. To these superintendents, board behavior of this sort was unethical.

3. Unethical because illegal. There were a few incidents in which the superintendent faulted the board for not following state law and found such behavior to be unethical. For example, one superintendent said it was illegal and therefore unethical for the board to employ a board member as a school district employee. Another noted that it was illegal to release information from an executive session to an employee. In another the board president's son who was shortly to be crowned as Homecoming King was arrested for being in possession of marijuana. The superintendent held that the son did not deserve the honor after his criminal offense. The board president tried to hold a secret meeting of the board to overrule the superintendent and it was this that was deemed illegal.

4. No advance warning. Finally there were just a few incidents in which the superintendent held the board behavior to be unethical because the superintendent was given no advance warning. In one case this had to do with a negative vote on the superintendent's contract and the superintendent felt that "everyone should know about their job performance before it is too late." In another instance it was a principal who was the object

of a surprise decision by the board and the superintendent resisted this because of no advance warning.

Conclusions

These judgments by superintendents illustrate the degree to which expectations of role behavior are ingrained in the minds of superintendents. Even though each of these critical incidents was unique and individualistic, the determination of what was critical and what it was about the incident that made it critical by superintendents was often strikingly similar. Many of these school administrators were acting or attempting to act as the administrative conscience of the district, as a Solomon who arbitrates disputes, upholds the ethical system, and protects sound educational practice. When denied this role by the force of "private board(s)" superintendents were frustrated and often deeply hurt.

These incidents had made strong impressions on the superintendents who reported them. Forty-four percent of the superintendents perceived there to be direct consequences for themselves or the district as a result of the incident. Others cited no direct consequences but spoke of a lingering aura that effected superintendent/board relationships.

Implications

From the perspective of superintendents, problems with role definition and behavior lead to conflict. One of the consequences of these situations is that superintendents judge board behavior (collectively or individually) as educationally unsound or unethical. Conditions that lead to problems with role definition and to ethical judgments arise from the very nature of the lay board and from the preparation and socialization of school administrators.

The resulting critical incidents in school district governance are unlikely to be healthy for public school children. Conflict between superintendents and board members is not likely to have a direct impact on children in the classroom for usually the debate is a bit removed from that level. But one can assume that children miss opportunities because the organizational level that makes resource allocation decisions is too busy squabbling to attend to the future needs of their charges.

The end goal would not be to eradicate conflict between superintendents and boards; that conflict is essential. The end goal should be, to borrow a phrase from Mary Parker Follett, to make that conflict constructive. "Conflict as the moment of the appearing and focusing of difference may be a sign of health, a sign of progress" (Mary Parker Follett, 1930).

To help school district officials and administrators make conflict more constructive, however, requires changes in two areas: (a) assistance to boards, and (b) alteration in the preparation and socialization of school administrators.

1. Assistance to boards. Danzberger et al. concluded in their national study that "most board members had little idea of the scope of the commitment required of them when they joined their boards, or of the enormous body of information that they must master and constantly update, or of the leadership and interpersonal skills that would be required (Danzberger et al., 1986, p. 45).

This line of reasoning has led some states to mandate board member preservice and inservice training. Such training normally constitutes a workshop for new board members and some issue-oriented sessions for other board members who wish to avail themselves of the opportunity. Board members can sometimes satisfy state mandates that they educate themselves about schools by attending an annual state convention.

The problem with such approaches is that inservice activities are of short duration and seldom oriented toward the needs of a particular board. Inservice activities serve a useful purpose but tend not to be helpful for a superintendent and board whose relationship is in serious conflict.

Essentially, the preferred strategy has been to educate the board in the hopes that education will prevent problems. An additional strategy is to recognize the board as an organic entity and plan to nurture it when it needs nurturing. The following suggestions relative to boards are made:

1. The state, not just the state administrator's or state school board's association, needs to take an active role in helping boards function better.

2. This should include the development of funding sources that boards in need of assistance could draw upon for boards are unlikely to allocate local resources for board development and assistance.

3. The local superintendent should not be the primary conduit through which the board learns about the mandate of state law and the state should relax its expectations that the superintendent be the sole enforcer of state mandates.

4. A recognition of the fluid nature of role negotiations and role acting require competency in communication and interpersonal relations and such areas should be emphasized for board development activities.

Practitioners suggest that the nature of board members has changed, that increasingly individuals with an affinity for the corporate model of governance are being replaced with those who seek greater influence over operations. Superintendents suggest

that where once school board members tended to be from businesses and commercial backgrounds there is now greater diversity.

We suspect this may be true and offer the suggestions above as possible approaches to helping make these new boards more effective.

2. Alteration in the preparation and socialization of school administrators. As in poker the deal passes back and forth. The idea that the superintendent should always call the game and deal the hand was probably never very realistic. This study suggests that it is an idea that does not fit well with reality. Therefore, both the preservice education and the inservice development of school administrators needs to move away from the corporate model of governance as an ideal type. Instead, a model that emphasizes shared governance, communications, and interpersonal relationships needs to be promoted in those developmental arenas.

The following suggestions relative to the preparation and inservice of school administrators are made:

1. Preparation programs should include the reality of negotiated roles as part of the preparation of school administrators.

2. Prescriptive models of board and administrative behavior should be abandoned.

3. Training and practice in communication and interpersonal skills should be emphasized for those moving into line administrative positions.

4. Inservice resources for administrators need to be expanded and delivered by a diversity of providers.

We begin this analysis with the phrase "the buck stops here." But as any seasoned poker player knows, there are times when it is wise to eschew the deal and to let others take on the responsibility for the direction of the game. In such a situation, "passing the buck" serves as a strategy to keep the game going. Requiring that administrators pay attention to "passing the buck" should become as important to preparation programs as its presumptuous cousin.

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Table 1

Selected Perceptions of Board Members' Role

(N = 105)

	Should	Might	Should Not
1. Appoint only teachers nominated by superintendent	103 (98%)	2 (2%)	0
2. Concern itself with administrative problems	18 (17%)	19 (18%)	68 (65%)
3. Have a clear statement of policies	103 (98%)	2 (2%)	0
4. Have a statement of division of responsibility	95 (91%)	8 (8%)	2 (2%)
5. Imbued with philosophy that school exists for education of citizens	95 (91%)	5 (5%)	5 (5%)
6. Respect judgment of superintendent on educational matters	103 (98%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)

Data Source: Gross et al., Explorations in role analysis, 1958, p. 342. Percentages do not always equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 2

Classifications of Incident Type

	(N = 101)	
	Frequency	Percentage
Related to board family children or friends	23	23%*
Board member with personal agenda or complaint	21	21%
Disagreements with superintendent about hiring/firing	18	18%
Inexperienced board members did not know role	17	17%
Issues relating to finances or taxes, or bonds	8	8%
Accusations against superintendent	7	7%
Constant questioning of superintendent	3	3%
Other	4	4%

*Due to rounding, total does not equal 100%

Table 3

Criticisms of Superintendents

	(N = 101)	
	N	%
Unethical because educationally unsound	38	38%*
Unethical because rule not followed	38	38%
Unethical because illegal	7	7%
Unethical because no advance warning	3	3%
Not a matter of ethics	15	15%

*Due to rounding, total does not equal 100%